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# Ethnic relation among the youth in Malaysia: toward fulfilling the concept of one Malaysia

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## Abstract

The present Prime Minister of Malaysia has put forward the concept of “One Malaysia” in order to establish an integrated multi-ethnic citizens. This article will discuss recent research about ethnic relations among the youth in Malaysia and relate those ethnic behaviors toward fulfilling the concept of One Malaysia, which had become a national agenda. Most of the recent research had not shown impressive results. The ethnic relations among the youth was at the average level. The research findings indicate that the youth in Malaysia understood the importance of unity but, practically, it was only at the average level.

*Keywords: Ethnic Relation, One Malaysia, Harmony, Unity, Stable*

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## 1. Introduction

Current globalization challenges sweeping the world require the reassigning of strategies so as not to be excluded or isolated from the speed of development or not to become victims of oppression by certain quarters. To overcome this situation, Malaysians, regardless of race or religion, need to think and act as one race, that is, the Malaysian race that thinks and acts toward a common goal to build a world that is prosperous, progressive, peaceful, and safe, thus enabling it to compete with other communities in the world. In the effort to create a Malaysian race that is more resilient in overcoming all kinds of challenges brought about by globalization, including socialistic, economical, and political, Prime Minister of Malaysia, Dato Sri Mohd Najib Tun Abdul Razak, has introduced the concept of One Malaysia.

One Malaysia is based on the principle of ‘People First, Performance Now’. This concept fulfils the aspirations of Malaysians in line with the allocation enshrined in the Federal Constitution and National Principles. The Malaysian concept seeks to strengthen relationship and cooperation among the multi-ethnic people in this country as the main instrument to thwart the various threats and challenges that aim to threaten and disrupt the sanctity of their lives. This concept, if applied by all concerned, is also able to turn Malaysia into a more peaceful, well-grounded, and progressive nation in every endeavor that will be respected by the world over.

The One Malaysia concept, according to the Prime Minister, is “we stand, we think and we act as Malaysians and we take actions based on the needs of all ethnic groups in our country.” This does not mean that we marginalize affirmative action, which is the policy to help Bumiputeras as long as the policy is executed fairly and due consideration is given to Bumiputeras who qualify to get a certain consideration from the government. We venture out of acting within the ethnic walls which was practiced for a long time. Based on the above explanation, we can summarize the following: The One Malaysia concept dictates that Malaysian citizens and leaders play their part. In One Malaysia, we stand, think, and act as Malaysians, which means that people of all races and religions must think beyond racial boundaries. They also must act beyond the boundaries of ethnicity and race. Therefore, the Malays,

for example, cannot merely think only within the scope of its own race. They also cannot limit their acts to accommodate their own needs. The same is expected of other races. The sentence “and we take actions based on the needs of all ethnic groups in the country” is inclined toward the leadership of the country. This paragraph means that the leaders of the country will uphold and fulfill the needs and rights of the people regardless of race or religion in Malaysia. Actions will be taken based on the needs of all ethnic groups in this country and executed by the government since independence. This fact has its own mechanism whereby leaders fulfill the needs and wants of each ethnic group through their own representatives. Through the One Malaysia concept, the Prime Minister wants each representative to act beyond the boundaries of race and expand their services to other races.

Therefore, One Malaysia requires that all people working with the government realize this noble intention. All the people of various ethnic groups need to put national interests above the interests of individuals, particularly ethnic interests. Malaysia's efforts to realize the needs of target groups should focus on the students, especially the youth. This is because they are going to be the country's future leaders. One of our missions is to teach our youth to seek out the truth behind perceptions. Of course, this takes time and a lot of hard work. However, we cannot afford to have the next generation be subjected to perception at the expense of the truth. We already teach our children the history of our independence and to respect diverse cultures. We must also teach and guide them through our Constitution and laws. Of course, learning about the law and the rights and obligations of citizens is difficult. Nevertheless, we must start early and continue to reinforce each child's understanding of the political nature of life in our society. We must show them that the government is made up of individual people who make important decisions that affect everyone.

The government has agreed to create a special grant to assist and support the implementation of programs related to the One Malaysia concept organized by the youth. The Prime Minister said approval for the grant would be speeded up in order to enable more youths to be involved in the One Malaysia programs. The Prime Minister wanted the voice of the young people in the country to be heard, especially in relation to the concept of One Malaysia. He wanted the One Youth, One Malaysia concept to be absorbed in all youth movements in the country; the movement would become more meaningful if the young generation also adopted the One Youth, One Malaysia concept. It is the responsibility of the youths as inheritors to continue this noble effort by nurturing the national solidarity that has been built; otherwise, all our achievements will disintegrate just like that. He wanted the youth to remember that the peace achieved had not been easily attained but had been nurtured through the hard work of the past generation. He said that as the generation born after the Independence, the youth would be in the best position to realize the One Malaysia concept. He reminded the people to be loyal to the country and to look at each other from the Malaysian perspective. In other words, although the people are of various religious and ethnic groups, we must appreciate that we were all born in Malaysia. It is in this country that we live and die. As such, it is also to this country that we owe our allegiance. With these high expectations, the researcher had to assess and study the ethnic relations involving the youths in Malaysia. Ethnic relations is seen as a dynamic process in Malaysia. Such requires that a serious study be conducted in order to strengthen ethnic relations in Malaysia. Enhancing understanding among the youth is needed to realize the concept of One Malaysia.

## **Literature Review**

Recent research about ethnic relations in Malaysia showed that the tolerance level was at the average level (Zahara Aziz, et al, 2007). The research was conducted in six districts of the state of Selangor. The findings also showed that the score of ethnic unity had deteriorated from 1993 to 2007. The score for ethnic unity among Chinese and Indian ethnic groups was deteriorating, whereas the unity level among the Malays had shown no improvement. They found that the factors that contributed toward the unity level were economy and political. Thus, it was because of the government policy toward strengthening the unity among the three major ethnic groups in Malaysia, namely, the Malays, Chinese, and Indians. The research of Amir Hassan (2004) found that the socializing agent, such as early schooling experience, family background, religion, and peers, contributed in establishing a sense of unity toward different ethnic groups. The school structure, such as schools of different ethnicities, showed more tolerance behavior compared to schools with only one ethnic group. Schools with one ethnic group, such as Chinese or Indian schools, showed low tolerance among the students because they have been separated since early years of schooling in the primary school. Research among youth in Malaysia showed that their tolerance was at an average level (Ezhar

et al, 2006). The findings also revealed that the youth who were given early experience in the community with different ethnic groups showed a high tolerance level. The youths with high academic qualifications also showed a high tolerance level compared with those with low academic achievements. The result proved that an early schooling experience had an impact in socializing of students belonging to various ethnic relations (Ezhar et al, 2006). The importance of an early experience in socializing with different ethnic groups and a higher academic achievement had proven to be the catalyst of ethnic unity and tolerance among Malaysians. For Manso (2007), ethnic relations in Malaysia are very positive and are at a harmonious level. He found that everybody understood the importance of unity in order to live in harmony. This will improve the quality of living particularly in the social, economical, and political contexts. Khalim (2010) found, in a comparative study of rural and urban students, that the ethnic behavior among students were at the average level for the urban school students, whereas the rural school students proved to be closer to each other. Khalim (2009) also reported that the ethnic relation among university students was at the average level. The students understood the importance of good ethnic relations among different ethnic relations in Malaysia.

## Discussion

From previous studies, it is clear that ethnic relation between ethnic groups in Malaysia is still at a moderate level. The study on students who are classified as youth shows caution in relationships involving the various ethnic groups. The youth in our study still belonged in the educational environment and should have a better understanding about the importance of ethnic relation in Malaysia. Basically, the youth are aware of the need for close relationships between ethnic groups for economic stability to be achieved. Government's emphasis on the importance of education in bridging the inter-ethnic relations have brought good results in the close relations between ethnic groups in Malaysia. The education system has a strong emphasis on the issue of unity among ethnic groups in Malaysia. After evaluating previous studies, students who represented the youth had shown a certain degree of feelings of prejudice toward different ethnic groups. Prejudice involves suspicious feelings toward other ethnic. In explaining prejudice, one of the prominent theories is the Intergroup Contact Theory (Gordon, 1954). The theory has affected modern social psychology only in the last decade or so, focusing the effect of cross-ethnic interaction. The theory has the vision on the possibility of positive outcomes from ethnic relations if the surrounding environment gave suitable support. These supports came from sharing common goals and having a structured education system from the authority to carve a harmonious and stable relationship among different ethnic groups.

The government should enhance and create a positive situation in order to promote positive contact among different ethnic groups. This could be done particularly through education. As Gordon has proposed, the positive effect of ethnic interaction under one circumstance (i.e., good environmental conditions) would improve the quality of contact; this research is optimistic that education could be considered as one of the catalysts that could be the promoter in establishing good environmental conditions. Thus, as Gordon suggested, suitable conditions will promote good interaction among different ethnic groups, and the most suitable platform is by giving ample knowledge to build positive attitudes among the students from different ethnic groups. According to the theory of assimilation, different ethnic groups could assimilate with other ethnic groups in order to live in harmony (Shamsul Amri, 2007). In the case of Malaysia, the Chinese and the Indians should assimilate themselves with the major Malay ethnic group. According to the theory of beliefs, racism is closely related to the existence of prejudice among different ethnic groups (Rokeach & Mezei, 1966). This is because of different beliefs among the ethnic groups. Thus, it brought about negative feelings toward each other. Recent research showed that prejudice resulted from the establishment of groups, ethnocentrism, and stereotype (Hamilton, 2007).

In Malaysia, prejudice and stereotype are the result of different education backgrounds from the early years of primary education. The vernacular system of education has already divided the students in various environments of socialization. There are Chinese schools, Indian schools, and the national schools. Majority of the students in the Chinese and Indian schools are Chinese and Indians, respectively. Majority of the Chinese and the Indians did not attend the national type primary school. Most of the students in the national school are Malays. That means their six years of schooling did not give them any chance to mix together with different ethnic groups. They only have the chance to mix together when they are in the secondary school. At this stage, some of them face a culture shock, thus affecting their behavior. This created behavior, such as gang fighting with different ethnic groups, shows disrespect

toward students and teachers of different ethnic groups (Khalim & Norshidah, 2009). The vernacular school has already built boundaries among the youth in their early schooling years. This is a bad effect of the vernacular system, whereas we wanted an education system that could bridge the gap between the different ethnic groups. The best alternative is the national school whereby different ethnic groups could study together at one place in the same surrounding. This will promote a better understanding among the different ethnic groups. Thus, the youth will have the chance to lessen prejudice and build greater unity ties among themselves.

## Conclusions

Ethnic relations in Malaysia is dynamic. Armed with that awareness, the concept of One Malaysia was introduced for unity and stability to progress. It will be beneficial to the public. After gaining independence 53 years ago, relations between ethnic groups was found to be good. Yet the government's efforts to introduce the concept of One Malaysia is an effort to strengthen relations between ethnic groups in Malaysia. Thus, the government had strengthened the education sector in order to provide knowledge to the students. This will enhance the students to be more open-minded and tolerant. They are the human capital and they are the suitable platform to be carved as good citizens. As such, a peaceful country will be set up. The education system should be reviewed so that it can provide a good foundation toward unity among the ethnic groups in Malaysia. We want the finest generation of youth who have a mind free from prejudice, which may alienate the relations between ethnic groups in Malaysia. The national school system should be established and realized with an open feeling among people of various ethnic groups with the importance placed on the main level. The main agenda is unity. The youth are able to realize the concept of One Malaysia whereby they were given a solid foundation by the government as well as support from the people on the program toward the direction of unity. Unfortunately, there are still certain ethnic groups that are not willing to support the national school system. This highlights the selfish attitude that still exists among the people. Realizing the concept of One Malaysia requires a shift in thinking which puts the national interest above all. Students who have been given good education will produce youths with national character. Thus, ethnicity will be narrowed. If the youth still practice ethnicity, it is a sign of failure of adults to provide a solid foundation toward the direction of unity. A more serious effort needs to be done urgently in order to strengthen the youth with basic education that could open up space for a multi-ethnic unity. The future of the country depends on the youth.

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